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EXPERIENCES OVERSEAS

BY ORLANDO C. DAVIS, *Librarian, Public Library, Waltham, Mass.*

Mud; every address which pretends to give a correct impression of welfare work in France during the past winter should begin and end with this word. The French people asked us not to judge French weather by the continuous rains we were experiencing this winter, but I have a never-to-be-forgotten impression of why the boys in khaki called the Frenchmen "frogs," because they would have drowned years ago if they had not been *ranac*.

St. Aignan, or rather its sister town Noyers, was my first post of duty. It was to the big classification camp at Noyers that most of the casual soldiers and officers came to have their records straightened out and to be formed into new companies and sent home. Most of these men were from hospitals.

Both Noyers and St. Aignan were crowded to overflowing. Barracks in France usually had no floors, and very often tents had to be used instead of barracks. There were no lights available except candles, and often not even those. Such was the general condition of this camp last January.

After supper the first night, I went over to a big Y. M. C. A. hut in the classification camp, where we had a collection of books which the "Y" was assisting us to distribute to the men. In the rain and mud outside the building were 240 men waiting for a chance to go into the "Y" to sleep on the floor. The hut was crowded with men anxious to see a show then going on, and desirous also of being in a dry place, but the entertainment was cut short to provide dormitory space for these men who had suddenly appeared on the night train. At 8.30 p. m., we went to another "Y" hut, and found 480 men just preparing to sleep on the floor there.

Can you imagine doing much library work in these buildings? We had collections of books at all the Y. M. C. A. and K. of C. huts, but reading spaces were

nearly out of the question in view of the need of every dry spot for purely elemental needs. We had a good collection at the "Y" central hut, but this room was also the headquarters of the house mother, who always had a group of men waiting to have buttons sewed on. This was also the only place for the checker games as well as the only place for the French class; but the books were very popular and the circulations were splendid.

In order to provide a place where books should be something more, however, than a side line, and to provide a headquarters for our work in a region about twenty-five miles square and including several towns, and to make one more place where men could be dry and warm, we arranged with the engineers for the erection of an A. L. A. building in the classification camp. The building was about completed when I left St. Aignan. I should also say here that St. Aignan now has miles of board walk and good sleeping accommodations for troops, but I have told you some of the disagreeable conditions for the purpose of emphasizing the value of the welfare work in the camps in midwinter.

After I had been in St. Aignan two weeks, Mr. Stevenson sent me to Le Mans, the headquarters of the American Embarkation Center, a region where conditions were similar to those in the St. Aignan region, but on a larger scale. The American Embarkation Center was nearly 100 miles square, in the west of France, and most of our troops passed through it on their way to the States, except the casualties who went direct to the ports from St. Aignan.

In the A. E. C., as the area was commonly known, the final records of the Divisions were made up, men were deloused, and all was put in readiness to go on to the ports when the boats were ready. Sometimes the men stayed there two weeks, sometimes six weeks, depending

upon the number of boats available. The troops had been sent into this center so fast that all welfare organizations were taken by surprise and, owing to the very serious shortage of transportation in the area, the problem of getting supplies distributed was a difficult one. The region had a capacity for holding nine divisions at a time, together with the permanent troops, and 200,000 men were at hand most of the time.

During the first six weeks of my stay at Le Mans, every welfare organization either doubled or trebled its huts, plans and workers. When I arrived, I found the American Library Association's central library was being run by the Y. M. C. A. in a little room, 15 x 20 feet, admitting of twelve men seated. It was in the "Y" central hut, on the second floor, and was the most cheerful place in the building, in spite of the poor invitation offered by an overcrowded room. A man would stick his head in the doorway, and ask, "May I come in?"—questioning whether he could get in, even if allowed. The reply of the Y. M. C. A. librarian was always a hearty "Come right in! But we won't ask you to stay too long tonight after you find your books."

Obviously, larger quarters were necessary for a central library. At first, I tried to rent parts of buildings in the center of the city, but the 70,000 addition to Le Mans' normal population, caused by the arrival during the war of Belgian and French refugees, made the search a fruitless one and compelled us to plan for the erection of a building of our own.

Books did not come through in sufficient quantity in February, but the first installment of our educational sets, each containing about 850 splendid new titles, arrived at Le Mans in that month, and a happier lot of men you never saw than some of those who used these fresh, up-to-date books. And there were classes in the Army School which began work only after the A. L. A. books arrived, because the Army textbooks had not come. In fact, many classes would never have start-

ed had it not been for the A. L. A. books.

The office work of the A. L. A. at Le Mans was well cared for by Miss Huxley, of the *Library Journal*, whom we got transferred into the A. L. A. from the Red Cross. She acted as secretary, and made necessary arrangements for A. L. A. service with visiting officers while I was overseeing the erection of buildings or delivering books to men in the field. Her attempts to get printing done during a printers' strike, to telephone over a hopelessly busy telephone wire, to entertain French people who were so pleased to find an American in the office who could talk French, to type 150 words a minute, to send daily telegrams to Paris for books and more books, and similar instances, would easily fill a number of the *Library Journal* and perhaps some day a book.

The Le Mans central library, which we finally got erected, was 17 x 90 feet, not large, for we had a storehouse to serve as storage for cases, and we had many collections of considerable size not far away; but it was the most cheerful building imaginable, and, like all the libraries, very much used. I have heard men step inside the door and, after the first shock of surprise, use some such phrase as, "I haven't seen anything as fine as this in France." Many French civilians visited the library with much interest, because public library service on the modern plan is unknown in France, and nothing of the sort was being done for the French soldier.

Quite naturally, in this Army library work many books did not come back to us, because of the rapid movement of the troops, but the books then went into the A. L. A. service in some other region. I think I received as many books from other regions as I missed in the tray, but no rigid system of accountability is possible in an army, because of the rapid change, both in the personnel of troops and of welfare organizations. Response to overdue cards was good, however, and the assistance of the officers of moving troops

in collecting books from barracks and billets was splendid.

Let me now speak of the A. L. A. library at the largest cantonment near Le Mans, known as the Forwarding Camp. This building was completed March 3 for the A. L. A. by the Army Engineers, at no expense to the Association. It was built next door to the Army School, where 1,200 men were in attendance, who used the library as a study room. The combined use of the library by students and novel readers also proved too much for its capacity, and the building was doubled, giving us a reading room 105 x 40 feet.

Everyone was interested to get the A. L. A. service installed, from the General down. The draftsman could hardly get the plans drawn soon enough, because he was so anxious to get a book on mechanical drawing. It was the chief of the construction engineers who tried to find a study book for himself one day from a lower shelf by aid of a match and so decided that there was really needed the amount of electric light we had asked for.

It is significant that the side of the room where were located the study books was always more crowded than the fiction side. The reference questions were always most interesting. One man wanted to bind the banks of a hill so that the soil would not wash into the hollow, and another wanted to know where he could buy the best lace to take home. Perhaps even Congress would be glad to get the viewpoint of the American soldier as expressed in the debates for which special material was selected. The last debate reported was on universal military training.

I got to the Forwarding Camp library one day before Miss Ferguson had opened the door and found a line of forty-five men waiting to get in. The line was as long as an ordinary canteen line, though mental food is not usually considered as popular among young men as the kind that goes into the stomach. Several books in this camp library are known to have been circulated three times in one day, and

many times it has happened that a man would bring his friend when he brought his book, because the chance to get a good book in the English language was too precious for his friend to lose. I have delivered boxes of books which had been telephoned for, and found twenty-five men waiting for their arrival.

The two A. L. A. buildings which I have described were carried on similarly to the camp libraries in the United States, except that we were obliged to use even more short cuts than the libraries in the cantonments at home.

The A. L. A. also had many smaller collections which were being cared for by the other welfare organizations, by school officers, or by commanding officers, and it was to a company of engineers working on a road, or a company of doughboys billeted in a little village miles from normal life, with no "Y," or "K. of C.," no "Red Cross," and no railroad or electric car connections, that one's sympathies as a librarian were drawn. After a long day's work, there was no "movie" for them, and no educational lecture usually, so, as one man put it, "A box of books was enough to set you up in business."

There were eight hospitals in the region outside the city, all of them equipped with A. L. A. collections, manned by the personnel of the Red Cross. Boys who had been gassed, boys who had been torn by shrapnel, and others, who were just playing sick, could read, and often could study. A Red Cross worker wrote me, "It is wonderful what a difference a book makes in the mental attitude of these boys."

Also, outside of Le Mans proper, about eight miles from the city, we had what was known as the Belgian camp, where were 20,000 American troops. These boys were far enough from Le Mans to be unable to get the advantages of living near a city, and every welfare society was doing its best to make life more worth living there.

Long barracks buildings, with one window on each side, and a lawn of black mud a foot deep are my own chief impressions

of that camp. Here we placed our collections of books in welfare buildings, and also a remarkably good school library collection in a building especially erected for this purpose by the school department and placed under the continuous supervision of an assistant school officer with two enlisted men.

You have doubtless noticed that the United States Army in France was willing to go to any amount of preparation to get the A. L. A. books to the men. At the Spur camp, which held 7,000 quartermaster troops, supplying the whole region with building material, fuel and food, the A. L. A. had books at the J. W. B. hut, at the K. of C. hut, at the recreation building of the Military Police, and at the school building. The État camp, holding 1,500 United States railroad men, had a fine library of both fiction and non-fiction, in the care of the school officer.

There were thousands of men who had no regular book service in France. The lack of books and the shortage of transportation facilities were the chief causes of such failures as were experienced, and in order to have had transported enough books for France we should have been obliged to start shipments in large quantities many months earlier than we did. Thousands of books were bought in Paris and London by our Paris headquarters office to help make up the fiction shortage, but there were never enough.

However, I assure you that we were really getting those books which you so faithfully collected in your libraries for our boys. I saw books stamped or plated showing that they came from New York, Boston, St. Louis, Cleveland, Newton (Mas-

sachusetts) Keene (New Hampshire) and other cities, and I even had the thrill of seeing some of my own library books.

The 75,000 books in the American Embarkation Center were at work, as I have described to you, in over 200 collections. You will get a little idea of the problem with large divisions if I tell you that one division (the Thirtieth) had an A. L. A. collection in each of thirty-two towns. Your Association's work has made book readers of some men who usually read nothing more than the newspaper. Men have told me this themselves, or I would hesitate to say so. Other men have learned what modern public library service is who had not lived near a public library before. The money which you and your friends gave has helped many a man to continue an education or to get ready for the job at home. The A. L. A. books and the cheerful library quarters were also providing a wholesome substitute for cognac and its attendant vices. An officer told me he did not know to what limits of violence his men would go if he did not give them books and other recreation. Men grow stale so easily with nothing but troubles to think about. An enlisted man, bored and homesick, came in for books one day, and said the only thing he had to do was to act as a guard one day out of every fifteen. His chief duty the other fourteen was trying to keep out of mischief.

The boys, in spite of a late start, did well "over there" under trying conditions, and the A. L. A., in spite of its late start, did well under trying conditions.

But the boys are now here. Let us "carry on" here also.